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Compatibility snags annoy non-IBM users

Talk to any computer salesmen who sells non-IBM personal computers, and he or she will usually make light of "compatibility problems." Many dealers even sell "big blue" IBM PCs side by side with non-IBM gear, with the common assertion that they operate identically.

When pressed about software compatibility — the ability of programs designed for IBM PCs to run on the machine, or hardware compatibility — the ability of add-on or add-in peripherals designed for the IBM PC to be used, the salespeople typically say "no problem."

Segal

The sad truth is either: they are lying, or they don't know better.

Time after time, I've tested programs designed for the IBM PC family of products that work erratically, if at all, on so-called "PC clone" computers. And time after time, I've tested memory cards, disk backup units, and add-in circuit boards of every description that simply will not operate on non-IBM equipment.

Aside from the computer salesperson's self-interest, users usually want very much to believe that compatibility problems don't exist. Here's why:

✔ *Price.* "PC clones" — computers advertised to be both software and hardware compatible with IBM PCs — are now far less expensive than similarly configured IBM equipment. Some are actually one-half to one-third less expensive, depending upon the model being considered. For small businesses buying just one computer, savings of $1,000 to $2,500 are possible. For larger companies with dozens or hundreds of computers, the savings can be multiplied dozens or hundreds of times.

✔ *Extra features.* In addition to lower prices, most PC clones have features or advantages that are missing or inferior on the IBM machines. Salespeople are great at pointing these out. They range from built-in extra memory and sharper resolution screens to faster processing speed. Some companies — Leading Edge and Panasonic. With a lineup like that, all claiming "IBM compatibility," it's no wonder many business managers no longer are unthinkingly choosing IBM.

Based upon the many compatibility problems I've witnessed, and the many I've experienced myself, it seems a shame that so many people are being convinced to go with the clones. Time and time again, the decision is regretted later. The most common rationalization given for buying clones goes something like this:

"I've done my homework. All the software and peripheral devices that we plan to use have been thoroughly tested with the machine, and they work perfectly. It's manufactured by a major company and supported by a good dealer. I get more features for a significantly lower price. What more could I want?"

Answer: Future compatibility, and the convenience of running any combination of programs and peripherals later. It's very unlikely, in the long run, that you'll have a complete range of low-cost choices for expansion and productivity down the road.

You'll have problems hooking up local area networks (LANS), using backup tape systems, and running common programs that run with windowing or memory-resident software.

You'll wonder why your computer "freezes" when using several programs in sequence, when everyone says it works without a hitch on the IBM gear.

You'll constantly see warnings in manuals directed at you, to the effect that the product you just purchased "may not work properly" with non-IBM equipment. When you ask about new programs, you'll get answers like, "it hasn't yet been tested on your machine."

You'll often pay more for software, hardware support and maintenance.

The bottom line: Like it or not, the IBM PC family of computers — the PC, XT and AT — has become

ter processing speed. Some companies are so creative with their combination of lower price and long list of improved features that they are successfully stealing away from IBM a large chunk of the market.

✔ *Name brands.* If we were just talking about unknown brands from Taiwan or Hong Kong, the clones would not be so tempting. But we're not. In the ring are some heavyweight contenders — AT&T, Compaq, Texas Instruments and Hewlett-Packard; some middleweight sluggers — Sperry, NCR and Zenith; and some knock-out-talent featherweights — Tandy, the PC, XT and AT — has become the "standard." Simply put, sticking with the standard is the safest path for business users. It avoids all potential compatibility problems, which in most cases is worth the extra initial cost.

To be fair, it should be acknowledged that this position is controversial and that not all experts agree with me. Some say that the short-term economic gains often outweigh the long-term compatibility problems. On occasion, I've agreed — and then regretted it later when some compatibility-related problem arose. So I've learned my lesson.

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